



219 North Main Street, Suite 402, Barre, VT 05641

## COMPLAINT RESOLUTION FOR POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

To comply with US Department of Education regulations related to eligibility for federal student financial aid programs, the Vermont Agency of Education provides this information.

Are you a parent, faculty member, or student seeking an outlet for a complaint about a condition or incident involving a postsecondary school operating in Vermont? These guidelines are provided to help you. Basically, there are three avenues to pursue: the institution's established complaint resolution procedures, the VT Attorney General's office, or the institution's accrediting agency. The vast majority of complaints should be resolved with the school itself.

### **The number one source of successful resolution is the school itself.**

The VT Agency of Education does not intervene in the internal procedures of colleges and universities. Federal law, 34 CFR Subpart D, §668.43(b), requires institutions to make available to students information about how to file a complaint. Postsecondary schools participating in federal student financial aid programs are required to have formal grievance procedures. The school's student handbook usually describes the steps you must make to begin a grievance process. Often schools have both formal and informal processes to resolve complaints. The procedures should include steps to ensure that your concerns will be heard fully and fairly, and the procedures must provide for the prompt and equitable resolution of complaints.

When approaching the institution, you should be specific in describing the nature of the complaint and relevant information: the name of the parties involved, including witnesses, dates, the policy or procedure violated (if known), the course/program, and your contact information. In addition, it is important to include any supporting material that substantiates your complaint.

**Sometimes violations of federal or state laws are alleged.** In the case of discrimination, the appropriate course is the Office of Civil Rights. In the case of suspected consumer fraud, such as false advertising, or violation of a state law, the state Attorney General is the appropriate contact for filing a grievance.

**Rarely**, the appropriate place for a complaint is with the **institution's accrediting body**. The institution will tell you if they are accredited and by which accrediting agency. For schools accredited by New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), please use the following instructions or see the NEASC website.

## NEASC - Complaints

Complaints are formal expressions of concern regarding an institution's compliance with the *Standards for Accreditation*. Complaints meeting five criteria may be accepted by NEASC:

1. Focus on **institutional conditions**, not individual experiences;
2. Cite specific *Standards* and provide substantial **evidence** beyond general allegations that the standard may have been violated;
3. Indicate that a **serious effort has been made to resolve** the issue through the institution's internal procedures.
4. Be **signed** and include **permission to forward** the complaint to the institution. (Anonymous complaints or requests to keep complaints confidential cannot be accepted.)
5. Be submitted in a **timely** manner (Normally, the Commission will not consider matters that occurred more than three years prior to the filing of the complaint.)

If the complaint meets the NEASC Commission's five criteria for consideration, it is forwarded to the institution's president, who is asked to respond within 30 days. At its next regularly scheduled meeting, the Commission considers both the complaint and the institution's response and determines whether or not further action is required. The complainant and the institution are notified in writing of the Commission's decision in the matter.

For further information, consult the policy and procedures for *Public Comments* or the policy on *Consideration of Complaints Against Affiliated Institutions*, available through the NEASC website. For guidance on filing a complaint, email Carol Anderson ([canderson@neasc.org](mailto:canderson@neasc.org)) or call 781-425-7713 to be in touch with NEASC.

## Other complaints

If you believe you have exhausted avenues listed above and have information about a violation by a Vermont postsecondary institution, you may send it to the Vermont Agency of Education in writing so that we can direct the complaint appropriately. All complaints should be specific in describing the nature of the complaint and include relevant information: the name of the parties involved, including witnesses, dates, the policy or procedure violated (if known), the course/program, the name of the institution, and complete contact information. In addition, please include any supporting material that substantiates your complaint, together with a full description of measures already taken to resolve the complaint and all correspondence with the school about the issue.

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Note: Documents received in this office are considered public record. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. This office cannot give legal advice to any individual or take legal action on behalf of any individual.